

Father of Fairbury Pioneer Had Unique Life

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Hugh Steers led a fascinating life, including being captured by Native Americans in the Revolutionary War. Hugh had to wait five years and get an Act of Congress to receive his military pension. Hugh Steers was the father of Rachael Steers Darnall. Rachael and her husband, Valentine Martin Darnall, were the first pioneer settlers in the Fairbury area in 1830.

Hugh Steers was born in Northern Ireland in about 1758. He emigrated from Ireland to Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. On August 1, 1781, Hugh Steers joined the Pennsylvania Militia commanded by Colonel Archibald Lochry. Hugh was just 23 years old when he became a soldier in the Revolutionary War.

Lochry's force was part of an army raised by George Rogers Clark for a campaign against Detroit, the British regional headquarters. Clark, the preeminent American military leader on the northwestern frontier, worked with Governor Thomas Jefferson of Virginia to plan an expedition to capture Detroit. If they could capture Detroit, it would end British support of the Indian war effort. In early August 1781, Clark and about 400 men left Fort Pitt in Pennsylvania by boat, floating down the Ohio River. Lochry and his men left a short time later and tried to catch up with Clark's forces.

One of the most well-known Native Americans in that era was the Mohawk tribe War Chief Thayendanegea. He was commonly referred to as Joseph Brant. He was highly educated and met with George Washington and King George III. Joseph aligned several Native American tribes with the British in the Revolutionary War. He was commissioned as a British officer in that war.

Hugh Steers left Fort Pitt and headed southwest into Ohio and the Miami River area. His unit had about 100 soldiers. They were ambushed on August 24, 1781, by Joseph Brant and over 100 members of the Iroquois, Shawnee, and Wyandot tribes. Brant's band of Native Americans easily won the battle. This battle became known as Lochry's Defeat. Of the 100 men in the unit of Hugh Steers, 40 were killed, and 60 were captured. Hugh Steers was one of the 60 men captured by the Native Americans.

Hugh Steers was held as a prisoner of war for 20 months by the Shawnee tribe in their villages along the Miami River in Ohio. According to Hugh, the Shawnee threatened to burn and kill him. In the spring of 1783, American forces negotiated the release of Hugh Steers from the Shawnee. The Revolutionary War officially ended in September 1783.

After the Shawnee released Hugh, he traveled up the Ohio River back to Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, where he formerly lived. Hugh found Captain Orr, who issued him

a military discharge certificate. Hugh gave his discharge certificate to military authorities in Philadelphia and was paid his back wages.

In 1790, at the age of 32, Hugh Steers married Mary Fowler. They had a large family of 11 children. They lived in Boone County, Kentucky, less than 50 miles from where the Shawnee captured Hugh.

In 1828, Hugh Steers was 70 years old. His sons had left the family home, and his health rapidly deteriorated. By this time, most of the veterans of the Revolutionary War had long been drawing pensions. To qualify for a military pension, veterans had to show they were in dire need of income.

During his earlier years, Hugh Steers had shared the aversion of the average man of his day for a public admission of the need for aid from his government. But as the summer of 1828 began to approach, Hugh realized that necessity soon would compel him to take steps for the relief due him as a veteran from his government.

When he began considering applying for a pension, Hugh Steers realized how different his case was from the ordinary pension application. Most of his fellow veterans of the War of Independence had discharges or other documentary evidence of their military service. Most pensioners also had community members available as witnesses to any disputed facts of their claim.

On the other hand, Hugh Steers was the only member of his unit in the entire state of Kentucky. He also had no discharge papers. And in his case, most of his service during the war had been spent as a prisoner of the Shawnee after a short but bloody battle in which he had seen 40 of his comrades, including his Colonel, killed in a surprise attack as these men followed their Colonel into battle.

Hugh realized he needed someone to verify his military service and prisoner-of-war experience. Hugh searched and discovered that Lieutenant Isaac Anderson was in the same battle with the Shawnee and had also been captured. At the age of 70, Hugh set off on foot to walk 40 miles to see his comrade Isaac Anderson. Mr. Anderson made a sworn statement to the Butler County, Ohio, County Clerk, verifying the story of Hugh's military service.

Hugh then sent his pension application to Congress in 1828. His application disappeared into the "red tape" of Washington, DC. Many Kentucky military officials and prominent citizens sent letters to Washington to help secure the pension for Hugh. Four years later, in 1832, an act of Congress granted Hugh an opportunity to prove his pension eligibility in court. The court hearing found that Hugh Steers was eligible for his pension, and the court finding was sent to Washington. Unfortunately, no action took place in Washington.

In 1833, Colonel Robert U. Johnson sent a letter to the Cincinnati Pension Office and ordered them to start paying the pension to Hugh Steers. After a five-year fight, Hugh

Steers was finally granted his Revolutionary War pension. Hugh Steers collected his pension for 13 more years until his death in 1846 at the age of 89.

Descendants of Hugh Steers still live in the Fairbury area. Will Travis and his family are the ninth generation to live in the Darnall/Spence homestead south of Fairbury.



Mohawk tribe War Chief Thayendanegea who was commonly referred to as Joseph Brant.